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Brown Says Plane Report Was Aimed to Hide Details

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WASHINGTON, Sept. 4 — Secretary of Defense Harold Brown asserted today that the Defense Department's confirmation of a program for building aircraft undetectable by radar was meant to protect vital details of the highly secret project.

Mr. Brown, appearing before a joint meeting of investigative subcommittees of the House Armed Services Committee, said that he had "absolutely no evidence" to suggest that early disclosures about

the Air Force's so-called "stealth" aircraft originated in the Pentagon.

He said that after reports appeared in two periodicals and on television from Aug. 11-14, he decided that the best way to hold the line against further disclosures was to "declassify" the existence of the project.

Briefing Before News Conference

The controversy over the Pentagon's role in the disclosure of the "stealth" program was ignited late last week when Defense Department officials acknowledged that Benjamin F. Schemmer, editor of The Armed Forces Journal, had been briefed on the project before Mr. Brown's news conference on the subject.

Several members of the Armed Services Subcommittee on Investigations suggested that the disclosure to Mr. Schemmer had been designed to enable the Pentagon to publicize its success in developing planes that would be practically invisible to Soviet radar.

Mr. Brown and his deputy for research and engineering, William J. Perry, strongly denied that the disclosure to Mr. Schemmer or the subsequent news conference had been politically inspired.

Instead, Mr. Brown told the committee today, after discussions with Mr. Perry and senior Air Force personnel, he decided the best way "to limit the damage" caused by news leaks was to acknowledge the project's existence but refuse to talk about any details of its technology.

In adopting this course, he said "we have, in effect, created a 'firebreak' to prevent the spread of the technical details, which, because they are at the heart of operational effectiveness, must remain highly classified."

This rationale was sharply criticized by several committee members. Representative Samuel S. Stratton, Democrat

of upstate New York, the chairman of the investigations subcommittee, said that "protecting information by giving a little bit out is a strange strategy."

Meanwhile, Representative Robin L. Beard Jr., Republican of Tennessee, criticized Mr. Brown for not ordering an investigation of the initial leaks until Aug. 28, the day the subcommittee held its first hearing on the matter.

Mr. Brown said that it was more important to guard against future disclosures on the program than to track down the original sources of reports appearing in Aviation Week and Space Technology and The Washington Post and on ABC News.

A curious note, meanwhile, was injected into the growing controversy by the discovery that the secret project was discussed in some detail in Jane's All the World's Aircraft, the authoritative listing of planes in operation and under development around the globe, in the most recent edition, published last September.

Jane's says that the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation in Burbank, Calif., was building a single-seat, reconnaissance-strike aircraft "of which a primary feature is low radar, infrared and optical signatures," probably first flown in 1977.

Mr. Brown acknowledged when these reports appeared, General Richard H. Ellis, the commander of the Strategic Air Command, had urged the Pentagon to discredit the story.